

COCHITUATE RAIL TRAIL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING
March 21, 2016

Name	Affiliation	Present	Absent
Josh Ostroff	Board of Selectmen (chair)	X	
Jamie Errickson	Community & Economic Development Director		X
Geoff Lewis	Senior Planner	X	
Dick Cugini	Recreation & Parks Commission	X	
John Magee	Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee	X	
William Schoenig	Member at Large	X	
David Camacho	Member at Large (vice chair)	X	
Eric Jones	Member at Large	X	
Peter Henry	Member at Large	X	
Jan Henderson	Member at Large (clerk)	X	

This was a public information meeting for the Cochituate Rail Trail Project. Approximately 50 people were present including Arthur Frost and Linda Walsh from MassDOT, Bill McGrath and Andrew Ogalvie (BETA Group), Dennis Giambetti (Senator Spilka's office), Tom Branham (Framingham CRT) and Jon Marshall (Natick Parks & Rec. Director).

The meeting was called to order by Chair, Josh Ostroff, at 7:00 P.M. at the Morse Institute Library in the Lebowitz Meeting Room.

1. Presentation

Selectman Ostroff welcomed the public and viewers on Pegasus and noted that the presentation will be posted on the NatickMA.gov/crt website. He introduced the Cochituate Rail Trail with a drone's eye view video of the trail created by CRTAC member Will Schoening. The Framingham portion of the trail is now complete with a much anticipated Ribbon Cutting scheduled for May 14th, 2016.

The 25% design is currently being reviewed by MassDOT with changes requested to the southern terminus. Meetings with utility companies are still pending. Once the utility meetings and review are completed, MassDOT will hold a public hearing and this will become a MassDOT project. Notices were sent to abutters inviting them to come to the March 21st meeting to learn about the proposed project.

2. Public Comment & Questions

Question: What happens with the land and abutting property lines?

Answer: The trail will be 12' wide (possibly 14' in sections where we can do that) but the right-of-way including drainage swales and CSX ownership varies from 20-80' wide. We will work with abutters as the design progresses to include landscaping and erosion control. Privacy screening could be included where needed. We respect abutter's privacy expectations. We also anticipate a large number of people (say 1,000 on a Saturday) to use the trail and would not want to suggest otherwise.

Q: What if there is land in between abutter's property and the trail?

A: The metes and bounds survey will help clarify the land that is purchased. It is unlikely that there will be any land between that which the Town acquires from CSX and abutting property. There is $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre that is unused near Sons of Italy that might be helpful for a public use, possibly for benches, an interpretive sign or artwork.

Q: Have there been concerns or objections raised by residential or commercial abutters and how did you address them?

A: The last public meeting was 5-6 years ago, so now is the time to express concerns. You may also raise concerns at the Finance Committee meeting or Town Meeting. The Town has voted to move forward with this project over the years.

Q: The speaker recalled a survey being done several years ago and thought the Boston Scientific employees had been included, and pointed out that they are no longer there.

A: Yes, there was a survey of all abutters which included Boston Scientific and Natick Labs employees, but their responses were broken out separately. Overall the survey of residents showed support for the trail, but there was some opposition.

Q: This speaker said her biggest concern was the quiet of her backyard. She wondered if teenagers would use the trail as a hangout after movies and asked how it would be policed.

A: A safety plan will need to be developed. Not all trails are open at night. The trail has to co-exist with people's back yards. There would be posted rules and regulations to be enforced. Police and Fire would develop a plan before the trail is open. Abutters and the Committee will be able to review the plan. All of the Parks in Natick have regulations for safe use. Many other trails are closed from dawn to dusk with the possible exception of commuters (who keep moving and aren't lingering).

Q: Will the trail be illuminated?

A: That is not currently in the plan. It would add cost. However, if people wanted it to be lit we could possibly look into solar options. There will be lighting in the roadways where there are at-grade crossings and there may be lighting on the bridges.

Q: What will you do about trash, littering and maintenance?

A: Again, we anticipate there will be a maintenance plan that is created with the Department of Public Works. The Town is working on a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Friends of Natick Trails which would allow them to organize clean-up days. Maintenance is more successful if it is done on a regular basis and people take pride in the area. We don't want it to become a magnet for trash. On a related matter, Pat Conaway and his crew of volunteers have been doing a great job keeping Natick open spaces clean. The community is developing a culture of responsibility that is supportive of our open spaces.

Q: As an abutter will I have direct access to the trail or will there be a barrier between properties?

A: Some abutters will want physical and visual access, others may want screening. There is currently a natural vegetative buffer along the right-of-way. It is not necessary to preclude access. If you want a fence or landscaping we can try to accommodate that. There is no intention to put continuous fencing or barrier along the trail except where there is a safety concern (e.g., a culvert or a steep slope). We do anticipate some fencing at AmVets, Camp Arrowhead and the Cochituate State Park where this has been requested. We are only at 25% design now; as we get closer to 75% design we will want to directly engage with abutters regarding their property.

Q: The trail is supposed to end at Willow Street now. Will there be betterments to Willow Street itself?

A: Willow is a public street and we have not yet looked at the condition. Public Works is not here tonight. It would make sense for there to be signage and striping to ensure bike access to North Main Street either there or on Mechanic Street (which is in rough shape, is not an accepted public street for most of its length and may need to be paved to be regularly used for biking).

Q: What will happen to the Loker Street Bridge? Could it be made narrower?

A: It will stay in place as it is. The Town submitted a letter to MassDOT that says we do not have plans to open it to vehicles. It was closed for neighborhood traffic concerns and safety, and there are no plans to open it. It would be a significant Town expense if we were to reopen it. If we touch it, it will need to be renovated, which would be expensive.

Q: How will this affect property values? Will they go up or down?

A: Generally speaking, property values go up near trails as people want to be near them. That can be a good thing if you are planning to sell your home someday. However, it could also result in raised taxes.

Q: You said earlier that there could be 1,000 people on a weekend. Was that a specific number based on anything, or just a number you threw out? I've been on the Cape Cod rail trail, which is astoundingly successful, but doesn't have 1,000 people on it.

A: It was a representative number, close to what the Town of Arlington sees on their section of the Minuteman. The Committee will try to find better data. The Minuteman trail is also used by commuters and may be a good comparison.

Q: Jack Carr is an abutter who has watched the neighborhood become quiet with the freight trains gone. They used to spray herbicides 1-2 times per year. He thinks the trail would be welcome in the daytime, but is concerned about crime at night if it is lit (he would not want it to be lit). There needs to be communication with the police to patrol it routinely.

A: Mr. Ostroff said that the Committee will talk with Police and Parks & Recreation as well as the folks in Framingham and other trails to get a better sense of the issues and concerns.

A: Jon Marshall, Director of Recreation and Parks, explained that most Natick parks have a dawn to dusk policy. After dusk no one should be there. Police do check. They ask people who observe issues to notify them.

Q: What is the 'across the fence' methodology for appraisals that CSX uses? Can you explain it?

A: For every parcel of land abutting the CSX corridor there is a value to that adjacent land. They believe that the value of that land is the same as theirs. It does not depend on the condition or slope or marketability. On top of that they take the assembled bits and apply a 'corridor factor' which is worth some multiplier. Unfortunately, we have to use their methodology if we are to make a deal. They only do a set number of agreements in a year, and if we miss it this year we could be waiting a very long time. We are not planning to use local property tax funds for acquisition (only mitigation, state and private funding). They are selling to us assuming 2013 appraisal values in 2016.

Q: What will it cost to then build the trail?

A: We are estimating (at 25% design) that it will cost \$7.1m to build it with 80% coming from federal and 20% state funds. Between acquisition and construction we anticipate the full cost to be \$14.7m including \$800,000 for design, \$7m for construction, and \$6.5m for purchase. None of this would come from property taxes. This is a lot of money and it is good for people to ask these questions.

Comment: Tom Branham, Vice Chair of Framingham CRT, invited everyone to visit the trail in Framingham. He encouraged people to come and see how much traffic is on it and to get a better sense of the nature of the trail to help answer questions. He said that there had been some illicit use of the trail when it was abandoned property, as well as dumping of garbage, appliances, and construction debris. However, once construction began and the area was cleaned up, that went away. People who are doing illicit things don't want to be seen, and having activity on the trail makes it safer. He asked that Natick build our trail soon and come on over to visit your friendly neighbors to the north.

Comment: A. Richard Miller, who has been working on the rail trail concept since the 1970s in various capacities, believes that it is very important that people be able to access the Commuter Rail via bicycle, as can be done in Europe. He took ten minutes to explain the history of the trail. He said the trail was acquired by eminent domain for rail transportation purposes and feels strongly that Natick should not have to pay to get the land back, when it will continue to be used for public purposes. In the 1800s the railroad needed two locomotives and one high point east of the Berkshires was in Natick, so they lobbied to have the cut put in and put the rail below grade. The state and Town had to pay for this work, not the railroads. He feels that paying \$6.3 million for it is a ransom fee. His time ran out before he could explain how the rail trail people all over should band together to fight the rail roads and take the corridor back via eminent domain (in the broader sense, not in the strict legal sense).

Q: What will happen to property values? This speaker said that when the rails were removed her assessment went up \$30K due to the 'improvement'.

A: Property values are regularly reassessed and generally go up over time. It is possible that people will pay more to live near the trail. Mr. Ostroff did not want to speak on behalf of the Assessing Department, but wondered if there may have been more to the house improvements or nearby values that caused her taxes to go up.

Mr. Ostroff summarized some next steps based on the feedback from the audience, including the need for a safety plan and maintenance plan, the need to design abutter access once we are beyond 25%

design, to look into Willow Street improvements, and to look to similar trails to better understand the likely usage rates.

On a motion by W. Schoenig, seconded by E. Jones, the committee voted unanimously to adjourn at 8:40 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,
Jan Henderson